

[James Peak]

October 10, 1939

James Peak (Colored Laborer)

Route 1,

Columbus, N. C.

Adyleen G. Merrick, Writer

Dudley W. Crawford, Reviser Original Names: Changed Names:

James Peak George Hill

Mr. Jones Mr. Smith

Columbus Cabot

Judy Jane

Jane Liza

Cebe Harris Sam Coleman

Emily Harris Mary Coleman C9 - 1/22/41 - N.C.

"Well sir! Kin I believe my old eyes? You shore is come at the right time. I'm a needin' help 'bout my troubles. Its jest been settin' here on the porch studyin' whicha way to turn, but seems like my mind ain't long enough some how to figger it all out. I's powerful glad to see you.

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"If you don't believe I'm out-done 'bout my taxes and one thing then another, jest draw up that there rockin' cheer so you'll be comfortable and lemme tell you every whip stitch big and little. Its got 'em too.

"I'm so pore I ain't hardly got grave money, wouldn'ta had that if Mr. Smith hadn't tuck a notion ter buy my old mule Jack. He gimme a hundred dollars fer him. I put that money in the Post Office and settled hit there agin hard times and if I'd a knowed then what I does now, I'd a been a heap more shut-mouth than I'se been about that trade. Hit looks like every body is grudgin pore old George help. I turn here, and I turn there, and can I git 'sistance. Not me, I jest gits that hundred dollar trade throwed in my face.

"I can't see fur the life of me how folks figger I'm to make out to live. They say, 'Ain't you got folks to 2 help you Uncle George?' 'Course I is; three gals and a grandson livin' right here with me, but I ain't lookin' ter them fer help ner the gals husbands either, I'm an able bodied tax payer myself, I don't need no help frum nobody, if folks would only gimme my jestice and look at the sit'ation frum the same side I do. I scrimp and save workin' an hour here and another there, till I gits me five dollars. When I do, I goes over to Cabot and pays the man at the Court House. He say, 'That's fine Uncle George, you jest about caught up on your taxes,' but when I ax him how much more do I owe yet, he say to me, 'Well, I ain't got time right now to look it up, but I'll tell you next time you come. Shucks, I'm too old in the head jest to keep on pourin' water in a rat hole, I ain't fooled, I ain't never goin' ter git paid up, that's the way hit looks ter me. Do hit look so ter you?

"Not long ago I had to send for my gal ter come all the way down frum up thar mongst the Yankees to see could she find the difference 'bout them taxes. She come, and I dunno jest what took place, but everything got fixed up all right. Jane's quick talkin' and she's got learnin'. I spec she knowed a better way than I do ter git things straightened out. Any how she did.

"Now, low and beholst, 'bout the time we got that one fixed here come another tax bill right on top of the last 'un. What in the round world is I ter do?"

Old George looked up from his seat on a packing box with an expression of deep concern on his old wrinkled face. His mouth opened and shut as if he had more to say, but thought better of it. He bowed his head and moaned audibly, his old hands were clasped tight across his knees, he patted his foot impatiently.

"It ain't no secret, he continued after so long a time, 'I shore wouldn't tell you no lie 'bout that mule money, I never made no bones 'bout tellin' hit to the lady what runs that there office in Cabot fer the pore folks. She knows. I asked her in the fust place ter gimme work instid of rations and sich, but she say, 'You too old Uncle,' and gimme 'bout 'nough rations to have done me fur one good meal in my young days. 'Course now I ain't got no teeth, all I kin do is gum my vittles and spit out to the chickens what I can't make out to swaller.

"I can't live on what the county gives me, no mam, no body kin. I'se got to have work to settle taxes and sich, you know that your self. All this is turnin' over in my mind.

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"That's whut make me say, thank God I is knowed better times. I'm shore glad me and Liza made out to do well by the chilluns. I'm gittin' along now, I don't need much besides jest creature comforts, but I'm glad they all had a plenty when they was lookin' to me fer they care. I ain't goin' to have even creature comforts lessen I kin git this tax question settled some way 'er 'nother. Why, I kin remember when we fust come into these parts a body could 'bout pay their taxes with a couple of sacks of meal, or if it suited 'em better, work hit out on the roads. That ain't so now. County got all sorts of high priced road machines to do niggers work. When I quarrel 'bout this, boss man say ter me 'Keep up with the times Uncle, this ain't still the dark ages. ' Then he laugh like he done made a joke, tain't funny ter me though. I'se lookin' fer work! Lawd, these is wearisome days.

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"Do I remember when I was a little chap? Why to be sure I do. Yes mam, I come to life on old Marse Sam Coleman's plantation, down yonder in Spartanburg County. Pap worked in the fields and Ma was Miss Mary Coleman's house woman. We had a good cabin and a great big garden too, 'twern't no hungry niggers then. Marse Coleman was a rich man, he done well by all his niggers, same as he did his own family.

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We lived high I'm tellin' you the truth.

"I kin remember all the hosses names and the dogs. I kin remember young Marse Tom too, we used to play together. Ever time he got in some scrape 'er nother, the same trouble fell on me. Law them was days, me an him was into a heap er mischief. I studies a heap about that boy; I can't git no hear tell of him now in a mighty long time, he was awful hell raisin'. I 'spec he's come to a mighty bad end. I wished I did know whar Marse Tom is at.

"And now you wants to know how come me to meet Liza? Well, it was like this: Atter us come to live on the Mills plantation old Cap'n set up school fur his niggers and Liza come here frum Virginnie to teach it. Seems like there weren't no fittin' place fur the gal to live so Ma tuck her to board at our house. I was jest school age, but Liza tuck my eye frum the very fust time I seed her. I thought I was a man and 'twern't long 'fore I asked her to marry me and she say she will. We courted a spell, (me goin' to school to her on week days, and buggy ridin' her to meetin' on a Sunday,) and when summer come us got married. We went off quiet like one Sunday evening and asked Marse Johnson to marry us, which he done. I ain't never goin' to fergit how 6 Ma tuck on when we got home. "

Here Uncle George paused in his story and bent double with mirth. His old body shook with laughter, he patted his knees to emphasize his enjoyment, as his mind went back to the days of his courtship and marriage to Liza.

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"Ma's eyes jest bugged out with 'stonishment, she flung up her hands and hollerd, 'God-amighty boy, what is you done done. I believe you'se gone crazy! How old you reckon this here Liza is?' I felt sort of sheepish like, Liza did too. Time we sot down quiet like and got hit all figgered out it seem like Liza were about fifteen years older'n me. But that didn't make no difference to me then, hit never did, me and her got along frum that day till time come fer her ter die. I ain't never seed no better woman, she was smart too, 'twarn't nothin' much Liza couldn't do. Ma allers said the same. They got along together frum the fust, ef I so much as crossed Liza Ma took a hickory to me and 'bout wore me out! We lived there with Ma three years atter we got married, and never had a cross word with her. Tain't no tellin' how long this woulda gone on, only Ma died. Liza tuck on same as if hit were her own down right kin.

"No mam, we ain't allers lived in this house. The fust 7 one I built was awful shabby. Mr. Foster hep me set up the framin' then me and Liza done the rest of the work. 'Course we thought hit were awful nice when we fust set up house keepin'. Hit were new and done pretty good fer a while, but that house was feeble. We stayed there till one cold winter night the wind got up pretty brash and blowed the top off. We got out all right, but me and Liza was scared most to death. I allers knowed that house was flimpsy.

"Then we bought an acre of ground here where we're at now and got started building this here house, but nobody finished it, because we've lived here nigh on to fifty years and it ain't finished yit. I'm allers aimin' to, but I ain't got around to it some how. Now that Liza's gone, seems like I don't keer ef it gits finished er not.

"Liza died, lemme see, hit'll be three years ago come Christmus week. Doctor never would tell me her trouble, but I knowed she was goin' ter leave here. That night she tuck sick we'd been savin' sawin' wood most all day and gittin' hit in out of the weather. Liza seemed all right but in the night she say 'George, I'se hurtin'.' I got up and lit the lamp. I hollered

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up my grandson. He come runnin' out pullin' up his galluses as he come. I say 'Go fur the Doctor, boy, and don't you lose no time.'

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"I drapped down by Liza's bed and 'gun ter rubbin' her side and prayed best I knowed how. Jane Liza say 'Don't keep a prayin' fer me George, you're jest a holdin' me back. God's done called me, Honey, I'm agoin' home.' Then she'd pat my hand and say, 'Don't grieve Honey, I'll be waitin' fer you in Heaven.' I don't fergit what she promised me. I try to live humble and peacable so's when I die I can go where Liza's at. I try to keep up her flowers and look atter her possessions the best I know how. I even worry with her chickens 'though I don't eat no chicken meat, ner eggs. I'm goin' ter hafta give up mindin' them chickens though, it's come to the point where I'm jest tendin' chickens fer thieves. I don't more'n git a flock of biddies ter fryin' size before marauders comes and makes way with 'em. 'Course I gits my 'baccar money outen tradin' eggs at the store, but I'm jest wore out tryin' to battle off them thieves.

"I'm shore gettin' agable, but I ain't never been sick a day in my life, though I'se been in the hospital, yes Mam I is! It come about this away: It was a widenin' wen side of my head, hit bothered me a heap. Doctor Palmer he say, 'Better git hit off George, 'fore hit gives you trouble.'

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I went on over to the hospital jest like he say do. I ain't know nuthin' 'bout sick places. Doctor-surgeon he tuck me into a quare smellin' room and made me lie down on the hardest doggone bed ever I hopes to see in all my life. Why I wouldn't give a nickle fur a row of 'em fur as frum here ter Cabot.

"There was a nice lookin' lady all dressed in white. She stood long side 'er the bed and helt my hand and smile down at me jest as kind. Then she lay out fust one curious lookin' tool then another. Doc, he washed and washed his hands like he aimed to make that one job do fer always. Then when he got everything jest ter suit him he come over to where I was

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at and he say to me, 'George, how 'bout your will, is you made one yit?' I looked at him sort of 'stonished and I say, 'I God if that the way things is goin' ter turn out, let me up frum here, there ain't a goin' ter be no cuttin' at all, fer I'se gone frum here.' Well, Doc and the nurse talk me out of leavin'. Doc say he jest runnin' on 'bout that will. He got a long needle (it looked jest like one er Liza's quiltin' needles) and he stuck hit into the wen. I squinched up powerful, but I helt on jest the same. Then Doc say to the lady in white, 'Han me that white handle razor.' Time he say that, I shore got seared! I made 10 sure the man aimed ter cut my throat and I wished ter goodness I'd never tuck that wen ter be out off. Doc, he tuck the razor though and he whittled and sawed till he made way with that wen. I don't reckon I'se ever been scared so bad before. When he got all done he study me and then he say, 'George, I bet you could claim kin to a rhinoceros, you got the damdest toughest hide ever I tried ter cut on in all my day and time ' Shucks, that's jest, the way white folks makes sport of us niggers! But let me tell you sumthin' Honey, that's the last cuttin' airy doctor'll ever git to do on old George frum now on.

"Ef your you're headin' towards Cabot any time soon I do wish you'd please mam drap by and see if you can make out what's gone wrong 'bout my taxes."